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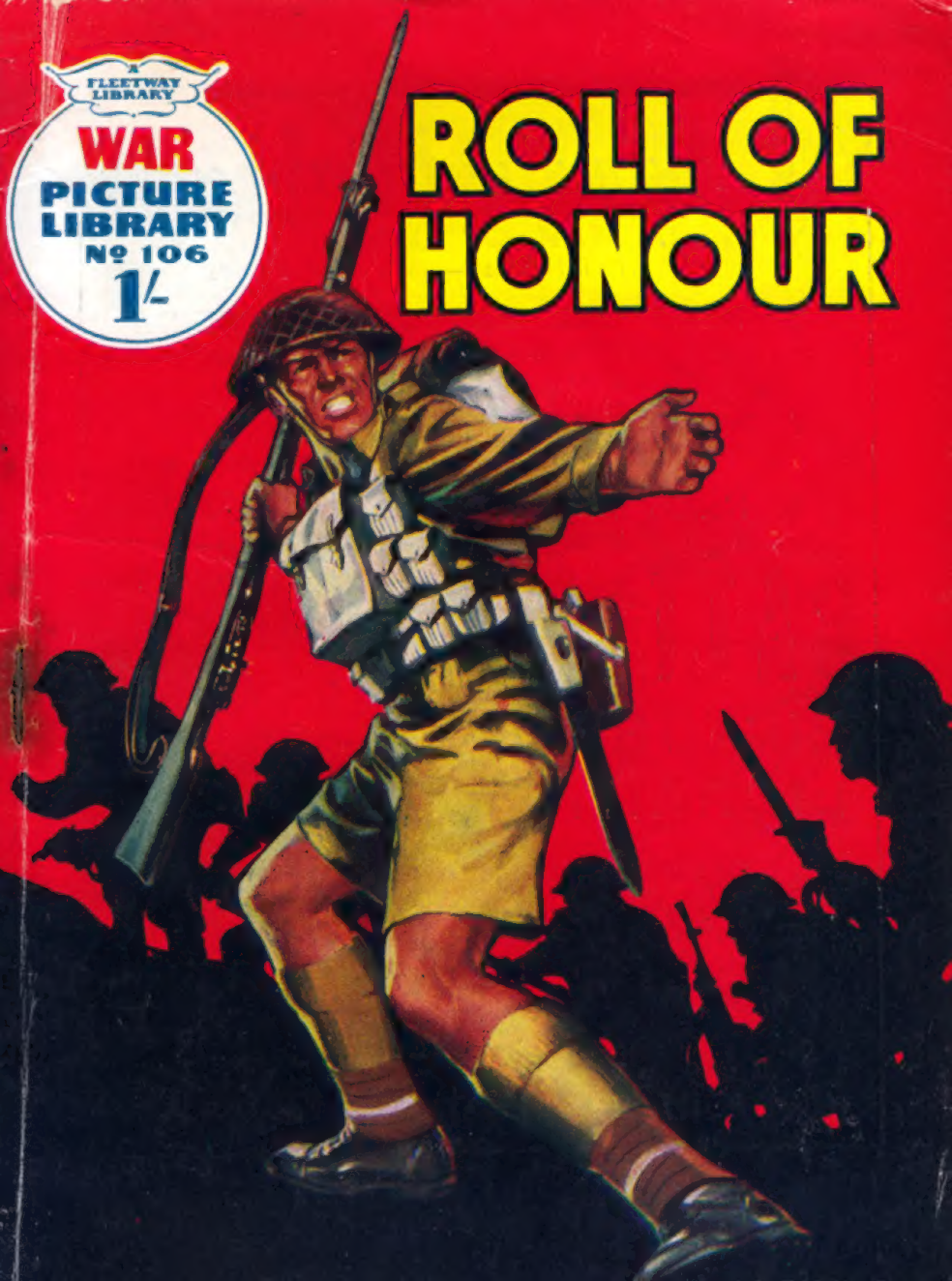

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ROLL OF HONOUR

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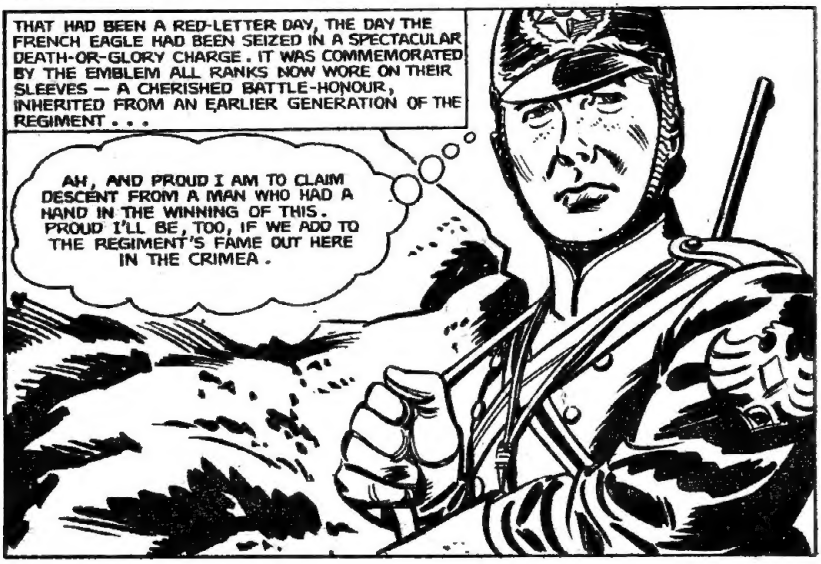
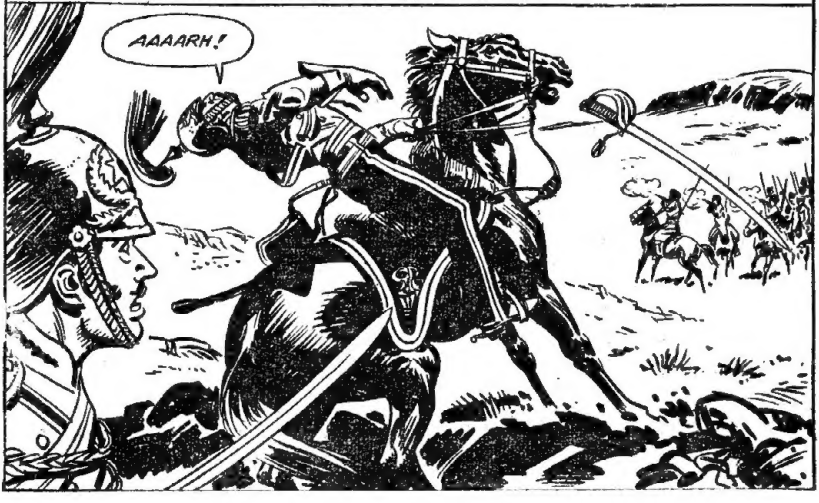
Chapter 1. DAY of SHAME

THE DISMOUNTED CAVALRYMEN TRUDGED TOWARDS THE CREST OF A RIDGE. YET EVEN THOUGH THEY MARCHED WITHOUT PRECISION THEY MADE A BRAVE SPECTACLE IN THEIR SMART UNIFORM.
TWENTY YEARS I'VE BEEN IN THIS REGIMENT, BUGLER THETFORD, AND NEVER BEFORE HAVE I HAD TO PLOD ACROSS-COUNTRY LIKE A CLOD-HOPPING INFANTRYMAN.
SURE, 'TIS ENOUGH TO MAKE MY GRANDFATHER TURN IN HIS GRAVE, SERGEANT WATTON. HE WAS WITH THE REGIMENT WHEN IT CAPTURED THE EAGLE-STANDARD OF THE FRENCH CHASSEURS IN THE PENINSULAR WAR AGAINST NAPOLEON.


THAT HAD BEEN A RED-LETTER DAY, THE DAY THE FRENCH EAGLE HAD BEEN SEIZED IN A SPECTACULAR DEATH-OR-GLORY CHARGE. IT WAS COMMEMORATED BY THE EMBLEM ALL RANKS NOW WORE ON THEIR SLEEVES — A CHERISHED BATTLE-HONOUR, INHERITED FROM AN EARLIER GENERATION OF THE REGIMENT...
AH, AND PROUD I AM TO CLAIM DESCENT FROM A MAN WHO HAD A HAND IN THE WINNING OF THIS. PROUD I'LL BE, TOO, IF WE ADD TO THE REGIMENT'S FAME OUT HERE IN THE CRIMEA.

THE OPPORTUNITY WAS AT HAND. THEY HAD BEEN DETAILED TO UNDERTAKE A FORCED MARCH, AND HOLD A RIDGE AGAINST A FLANKING-MOVEMENT WHICH RUSSIAN MARAUDERS WERE BELIEVED TO BE CONTEMPLATING . . .

AS HE DREW REIN ON THE RIDGE-TOP, COLONEL WAREHAM HEARD THE SLAP OF A MUSKET-SHOT AND THE WHISTLE OF A BALL THAT SEARED PAST HIS HEAD. ANOTHER MOMENT AND THE AIR ALL AROUND WAS ALIVE WITH LEAD . . .



THE COLONEL TOPPLED LIFELESSLY TO THE GROUND, HIS BODY PIERCED BY SEVERAL BULLETS. MAJOR BOURNE FLASHED A SINGLE GLANCE INTO THE VALLEY—THEN SHRILLED OUT ORDERS AS THE UNIT'S SECOND-IN-COMMAND...
COSSACKS! DEPLOY! DEPLOY! LINE THE RIDGE AND TAKE UP FIRE POSITIONS!

THE MEN OF THE REGIMENT FANNED OUT SMARTLY, SWARMING UP TO THE RIDGE'S SUMMIT, DROPPING FLAT TO TAKE AIM... AND MEANWHILE, IN THE VALLEY BELOW, THE COSSACKS WERE SHAKING OUT INTO OPEN ORDER AS WELL—LANCE-POINTS GLITTERING WICKEDLY AS THEY GATHERED FOR THE ATTACK...

THE RUSSIANS SURGED UP THE SLOPE, THE DRUM-BEAT OF THE HOOVES SWELLING TO A THUNDEROUS CLAMOUR. THE BRITISH TROOPERS AWAITED THE ORDER TO FIRE . . .
IF ONLY WE WERE ALL ON HORSEBACK, WE COULD MEET THOSE WILD DEVILS ON EQUAL TERMS!
THE ORDER TO FIRE WAS NOT GIVEN. ALL AT ONCE MAJOR BOURNE TURNED AND SCRAMBLED INTO THE DEAD COLONEL'S SADDLE . . .
GET BACK FROM THE CREST! WE'LL STAND A BETTER CHANCE AGAINST THE COSSACKS IF WE'RE AMONG THOSE ROCKS ON THE REVERSE SLOPE!
BLIMEY! I WISH THE MAJOR WOULD MAKE UP HIS BLOOMING MIND!

BOURNE HOPED THE ROCKS WOULD HELP TO BREAK UP THE RUSSIAN ONSET, AT THE SAME TIME PROVIDE HIS MEN WITH FAVOURABLE COVER.
BUT BEFORE THE MEN OF THE DISMOUNTED CAVALRY REGIMENT COULD EVEN BEGIN TO FORM A NEW LINE OF DEFENCE, THE COSSACKS WERE SWOOPING FEROCIOUSLY ON THE HINDMOST OF THEM.
IT'S ALL UP WITH US! I MUST HAVE BEEN MAD TO ATTEMPT A WITHDRAWAL...

THAT WAS WHEN PANIC LAID ITS ICY CLUTCH ON BOURNE. HE HAD MADE A GHASTLY ERROR OF JUDGMENT AND HE NOW LOST HIS HEAD COMPLETELY.
UNDER OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES HE MIGHT HAVE DISPLAYED A HEROIC QUALITY. AS IT WAS, HE SHOWED THE WHITE FEATHER... AND A YOUNG BUGLER WAS THE FIRST TO WITNESS THE INCREDIBLE — A BRITISH OFFICER ABANDONING HIS MEN!
THE MAJOR'S HOPPING IT! HE'S LEAVING US IN THE LURCH!
BUGLER THETFORD AND ALL WITHIN EARSHOT TOOK THEIR CUE FROM THE ABJECT DISPLAY OF THE REGIMENT'S SECOND-IN-COMMAND. THE CONTAGION OF THEIR TERROR RAN LIKE ELECTRICITY THROUGH THE REST OF THEIR COMRADES — SAVE FOR ONE GROUP...
STAND FIRM, MEN! STAND FIRM!

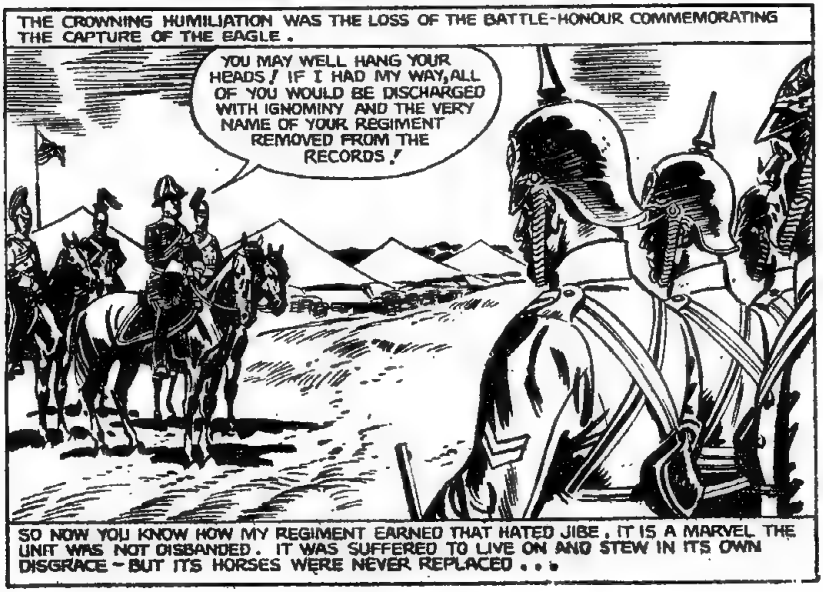
THAT ONE GROUP MIGHT HAVE REDEEMED THE REGIMENT FROM UTTER DEGRADATION—IF SERGEANT WATTON'S NERVE HAD NOT GIVEN WAY. THE VETERAN NON-COM TURNED TAIL... HE HAD BEEN TWENTY YEARS IN THE SERVICE, YET ODDLY ENOUGH THIS WAS HIS BAPTISM OF FIRE!
RUN FOR IT! IT'S EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF!

WATTON COMPLETED THE ROUT, BUT DID NOT GET FAR HIMSELF. A COSSACK LANCE LAID HIM LOW... ABOUT THE SAME TIME, A COSSACK SABRE ENDED THE BRIEF MILITARY CAREER OF BUGLER THETFORD...

AAAARGH!
AND NOT LONG AFTERWARDS, DEATH OVERTOOK THE MAN WHO HAD BEEN SO QUICK OFF THE MARK — THE MAN WHO HAD STARTED THE WHOLE TRAGIC COLLAPSE IN MORALE . . . MAJOR BOURNE PERISHED SHAMEFULLY — WITH A BULLET IN THE BACK . . .

THANKS TO A RESCUE EFFORT BY BRITISH INFANTRY, HALF-A-HUNDRED TROOPERS SURVIVED THAT DEBACLE. SOME DAYS LATER, THESE WERE PARADED BEFORE A PEPPER-AND-VINEGAR GENERAL — IN THE PRESENCE OF AN AUDIENCE WHICH INCLUDED THREE FOREIGN MILITARY ATTACHES . . .
CAN EITHER YOU OR CAPITANO ALVAREZ TELL ME WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT, HAUPTMANN VON STEINDORF?
IT SEEMS THE BRITISH GENERAL IS TO DELIVER A REPRIMAND TO THOSE MEN, CAPITAINE LAROCHE. THEY ARE OF A REGIMENT WHICH BEHAVED BADLY. I HEARD SOMEONE REFER TO THEM AS 'THE SCARLET RUNNERS'! IT IS AN ENGLISH JOKE WHICH I DO NOT UNDERSTAND . . .

IT WAS NO JOKE TO THE GENERAL, OR THOSE FIFTY DEJECTED TROOPERS WHO HAD TO LISTEN TO HIM.
YOUR CONDUCT HAS BEEN A BLOT ON THE ANNALS OF THE BRITISH ARMY, AND A DISCREDIT TO THE BRAVE MEN WHO GAINED HIGH RENOWN FOR YOUR REGIMENT UNDER WELLINGTON! NO WONDER IT HAS BEEN DECIDED THAT THIS UNIT'S LINKS WITH A SPLENDID PAST SHOULD BE SEVERED!


THE CROWNING HUMILIATION WAS THE LOSS OF THE BATTLE-HONOUR COMMEMORATING THE CAPTURE OF THE EAGLE.
YOU MAY WELL HANG YOUR HEADS! IF I HAD MY WAY, ALL OF YOU WOULD BE DISCHARGED WITH IGNOMINY AND THE VERY NAME OF YOUR REGIMENT REMOVED FROM THE RECORDS!
SO NOW YOU KNOW HOW MY REGIMENT EARNED THAT HATED JIBE. IT IS A MARVEL THE UNIT WAS NOT DISBANDED. IT WAS SUFFERED TO LIVE ON AND STEW IN ITS OWN DISGRACE - BUT ITS HORSES WERE NEVER REPLACED . . .

Chapter 2. DISCARD BATTALION

THE SENTIMENTS OF ONE BREN-GUNNER TYPIFIED THE SPIRIT PREVALENT AMONG MOST OF THE MEN OF THE REGIMENT. DISCONTENT AND BOREDOM WERE THE ENEMIES *THEY* HAD TO FIGHT — WHILE THE MEN OF OTHER REGIMENTS MADE HISTORY . . .

ADEN . . . THAT WAS WHERE REGIMENTAL SERGEANT MAJOR BARKER JOINED THE UNIT . . . BARKER, WHO HAD SEEN ACTION AGAINST THE ITALIANS AND THE GERMANS IN NORTH AFRICA . . . BARKER, SMOULDERING WITH RESENTMENT BECAUSE HE HAD BEEN TRANSFERRED FROM A CRACK REGIMENT TO THIS UNIT OF OUTCASTS . . .

THE R.S.M. FIXED HIS GIMLET GLANCE ON A TWO-INCH MORTAR. HE RAPPED OUT BRISK INSTRUCTIONS TO THE MEN IN CHARGE.
YOU, THERE — GET WEAVING! LOB A COUPLE OF BOMBS AT THOSE ARABS.
LOB A COUPLE OF BOMBS AT 'EM? WHAT FOR? THEY AIN'T WORTH BOTHERING ABOUT —
R.S.M. BARKER COULD HARDLY BELIEVE HIS EARS. AN ORDER QUESTIONED! HE OPENED HIS MOUTH TO DELIVER A MONSTROUS, ROARING TIRADE THAT BEAT ABOUT THE LUCKLESS MORTARMAN'S HEAD LIKE A BOMBARDMENT . . .
WHY, YOU HORRIBLE MISFIT! DO AS I SAY OR I'LL HAVE YOU OUT OF THERE BY THE SCRUFF OF THE NECK AND DOWN AT THE GUARDHOUSE IN DOUBLE QUICK TIME! MOVE!
THE NUMBER ONE ON THE MORTAR SCRAMBLED INTO FRANTIC ACTION. SO DID THE MAN ALONGSIDE HIM.
SO THAT'S THE NEW REGIMENTAL SARN'T MAJOR WE'VE BEEN LUMBERED WITH! HE SOUNDS A PROPER TARTAR!
STOP THAT MUMBLING! AND FACE YOUR FRONT! KEEP YOUR MIND ON YOUR JOB OR I'LL HAVE YOU ON JANKERS FOR THE NEXT FOURTEEN DAYS!

THAT FIRST BOMB DROPPED WELL BEYOND THE GROUP OF TRIBESMEN. A CORRECTION OF AIM AND THE MORTAR PLUMPED A SECOND CLOSE ENOUGH TO SHOWER A PECK OR TWO OF SAND OVER THEM . . .
BREN-GUNNER, GIVE THOSE RAG-TAGS A GOOD LONG BURST WITH THAT L-M-G!
YES, SIR.

THE LIGHT MACHINE-GUN STAMMERED BRIEFLY, THEN JAMMED. THE MAN BEHIND IT STRUGGLED TO CLEAR IT — SUCCEEDED ONLY WHEN THE ARABS WERE MELTING FROM VIEW. BARKER TURNED AWAY IN DISGUST. AND ADDRESSED THE STOCKY NON-COM WHO WAS HIS GUIDE . . .
WELL, FROM WHAT I'VE SEEN SO FAR, I WOULDN'T SAY THIS UNIT'S HALF AS BAD AS WHAT I'D BEEN LED TO BELIEVE. NO, BY THUNDER, IT'S TWICE AS BAD!

THE SERGEANT FLUSHED. HE WAS AMONG THE FEW WHO HAD VOLUNTEERED FOR THE REGIMENT . . . ONLY BECAUSE OF A LONG FAMILY ASSOCIATION WITH IT, THOUGH AS FAR AS HE KNEW, THE LAST OF HIS NAME TO HEAR A SHOT FIRED IN REAL ANGER HAD BEEN HIS GREAT-GRANDFATHER'S BROTHER . . .

THE R.S.M. IS RIGHT. WE'RE A PROPER LOAD OF SCRUFF! SAM THETFORD, YOU MUST 'VE BEEN OFF YOUR ROCKER TO PUT YOUR NAME DOWN FOR THIS MOB WHEN YOU ENLISTED.

ALOUD, HE OFFERED A LAME EXCUSE . . . FOR HE STILL HAD SOME TATTERED SHRED OF LOYALTY TO THE REGIMENT HE HAD JOINED— THIS REMOTE KINSMAN OF A BUGLER WHO HAD DIED MISERABLY IN A CRIMEAN SKIRMISH LONG, LONG AGO . . .

THE TROUBLE IS, SIR, OUR PREVIOUS REGIMENTAL SERGEANT MAJOR WAS TOO EASY-GOING.

YOU NEEDN'T TRY TO TELL ME ONE MAN SHOULD CARRY THE CAN FOR WHAT I'VE SEEN TODAY. I'M NOT A FOOL, SERGEANT . . . AND I KNOW SOMETHING OF THIS UNIT'S HISTORY.

BARKER AND SAM THETFORD ROUNDED THE SPUR OF A RIDGE AND SAW A TRUCK. A DRIVER LEANED AGAINST IT, HANDS IN POCKETS . . .

WHAT'S THAT LOUT SUPPOSED TO BE DOING, SERGEANT?

HE'S WAITING FOR US, SIR. THE TRANSPORT OFFICER SENT A TRUCK OUT TO TAKE US BACK TO REGIMENTAL H.Q.

WITH PURPOSEFUL TREAD THE R.S.M. STRODE TOWARDS THE DRIVER OF THE TRUCK WHO WAS LOST IN SOME DAY-DREAM . . .
WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE ?
EH? WHO, ME ? WATTON'S THE NAME . . . GEORGE WATTON . . . NUMBER TWO-FIVE-THREE-SIX —

WATTON DID NOT COMPLETE THE RECITATION OF HIS ARMY NUMERALS. BARKER'S VOICE BURST ON HIM WITH THE IMPACT OF A THUNDERBOLT!
STAND TO ATTENTION AND ADDRESS ME AS 'SIR' WHEN YOU SPEAK TO ME! GET THOSE SHOULDERS BACK! ARMS STRAIGHT AT YOUR SIDES — YOU DOZY SCRIMSHANKER!

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES R.S.M. BARKER READ THE RIOT ACT TO PRIVATE GEORGE WATTON, DESCENDANT OF A SERGEANT WHO HAD PERISHED FROM THE THRUST OF A COSSACK LANCE EIGHTY-ODD YEARS BEFORE . . . THEN HE ORDERED THE QUAKING TRUCK-DRIVER UP BEHIND THE WHEEL . . .
SERGEANT THETFORD, I DON'T INTEND TO SERVE WITH THIS UNIT ANY LONGER THAN I CAN HELP. BUT, BY HEAVENS, WHILE I AM WITH THIS UNIT I'M GOING TO SEE IT GETS A TASTE OF DISCIPLINE!

YOU CANNOT BEAT SQUARE-BASHING FOR DISCIPLINE . . . AND A WEEK LATER, RETURNING FROM A FURLOUGH HE HAD SPENT IN CAIRO, THE REGIMENT'S COMMANDING OFFICER WAS STARTLED BY THE UNFAMILIAR SOUND OF A STENTORIAN VOICE BEYOND THE WINDOW OF HIS OFFICE . . .
BATTALION!

THE COMMANDING OFFICER ROSE TO HIS FEET. HE WAS A MAN PAST HIS PRIME, AND ONE WHO WAS APPROACHING THE END OF A CAREER THAT HAD BEEN A DISAPPOINTMENT TO HIM. A SADDENED, DISILLUSIONED MAN . . .

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL BOURNE SIGHED WISTFULLY. HE DID NOT DELUDE HIMSELF INTO THINKING THAT AN IMPROVEMENT IN TURN-OUT WOULD RESTORE THE REGIMENT'S LONG-LOST STATUS.

SIX HUNDRED MEN SNAPPED TO ATTENTION, SLOPED ARMS, MARCHED ON TO THE PARADE GROUND TO FORM UP IN THEIR COMPANIES UNDER BARKER'S PIERCING AND CRITICAL EYE . . .
LEFT – RIGHT – LEFT – RIGHT! PICK UP YOUR FEET, THERE! KEEP THE STEP!

THE RANK AND FILE CERTAINLY REACTED FAVOURABLY TO THOSE DRILL PARADES, EVEN THOUGH MANY A MAN CURSED THEM UNDER HIS BREATH . . .
BREAK INTO DOUBLE TIME . . . DOUBLE – MARCH!
COR! IN THIS HEAT? I SHOULDN'T BE DOING THIS! I'M IN THE MOTOR TRANSPORT SECTION!
DO ME A FAVOUR, WATTON! SHUT YOUR TRAP, OR WE'LL BOTH BE ON A FIZZER!

A FRESH SPIRIT WAS INJECTED INTO THE UNIT AND THE OFFICERS VIGOROUSLY ENCOURAGED IT. PHYSICAL TRAINING PERIODS AND WEAPON-TRAINING PERIODS WERE STEPPED UP; . . BUT TO WHAT PURPOSE . . ? AFTER SIX WEEKS OF THIS GINGERING PROCESS, THE COLONEL SENT FOR THE R.S.M. . . .

MISTER BARKER, WE'RE UNDER ORDERS TO MOVE. I'VE ALREADY INFORMED THE OFFICERS. IT SEEMS WE'RE EVEN TO BE DENIED THE MODEST TASK OF KEEPING A PARCEL OF ARABS UNDER CONTROL. WE'RE BEING TRANSFERRED TO GIBRALTAR FOR GARRISON DUTY THERE.

GIBRALTAR, SIR?

THE R.S.M. REPRESSED A GRIMACE. HE WANTED ACTION. ADEN HAD BEEN HUMDRUM ENOUGH. BUT GIBRALTAR . . .

YOU'LL PARDON ME, SIR. MEANING NO OFFENCE, I'D LIKE TO APPLY FOR AN IMMEDIATE POSTING TO MY OWN REGIMENT — PREFERABLY TO MY OLD BATTALION. I THINK I CAN GET PAST ANY MEDICAL BOARD WITH MY WOUND. IT'S HARDLY BEEN BOTHERING ME AT ALL.

I UNDERSTAND HOW YOU FEEL, MISTER BARKER.

YES, THE COLONEL UNDERSTOOD — ONLY TOO WELL. HE WOULD HAVE GIVEN HIS RIGHT ARM TO BE POSTED TO A THEATRE OF WAR HIMSELF. FOR A WHILE, RECENTLY, HE HAD EVEN DARED TO DREAM HIS REGIMENT MIGHT BE ASSIGNED TO SOME IMPORTANT SPHERE OF OPERATIONS . . . A FOOLISH DREAM . . .

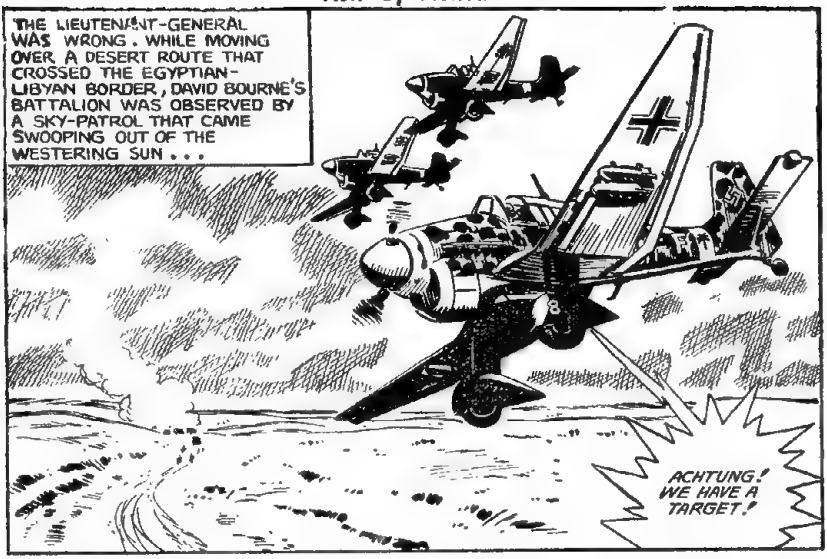
I'LL SEE YOUR APPLICATION GOES FORWARD — THOUGH WHEN IT WILL BE ANSWERED IS ANYBODY'S GUESS.

SEVENTY-TWO HOURS LATER THE REGIMENT WAS ABOARD A TROOP-SHIP — SCHEDULED TO VOYAGE ROUND THE AFRICAN CONTINENT AND HUG SAFE WATERS TO THE STRAITS OF GIBRALTAR. BUT IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THE VESSEL WAS DUE TO WEIGH ANCHOR HER CAPTAIN LOOKED IN ON BOURNE . . .
COLONEL, I HAVE RATHER A SURPRISING PIECE OF NEWS FOR YOU. I'VE JUST RECEIVED A SIGNAL CANCELLING MY SAILING INSTRUCTIONS AND ORDERING ME TO CONVEY YOU AND YOUR BATTALION UP THROUGH THE RED SEA AND THE SUEZ CANAL TO ALEXANDRIA.

IT WAS SURPRISING NEWS ALL RIGHT. THE REGIMENT MUST HAVE BEEN ALLOTTED A ROLE IN THE GALLANT EIGHTH ARMY'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE ITALO-GERMAN FORCES! IN ALEXANDRIA, A LIEUTENANT-GENERAL CONFIRMED THIS . . .
BOURNE, A MAJOR OFFENSIVE IS ABOUT TO BE LAUNCHED AGAINST THE AFRIKA KORPS AND ITS ALLIES. YOUR JOB WILL BE TO COVER OUR LEFT FLANK —

THE LIEUTENANT-GENERAL BENT OVER A MAP THAT WAS SPREAD OUT ON HIS DESK.
YOUR BATTALION WILL TAKE UP A POSITION HERE, ALONG PART OF THE NORTH RIM OF A DEPRESSION KNOWN AS THE WADI KHALFAYA. IN FACT, YOU'LL BE ON THE ONE STRETCH OF IT WHICH LENDS ITSELF TO ENEMY INFILTRATION AND YOU'LL HOLD IT THROUGHOUT THE OFFENSIVE. IS THAT CLEAR?
PERFECTLY CLEAR, SIR. AND MAY I SAY HOW PLEASED I AM THAT MY REGIMENT HAS BEEN SELECTED FOR THIS IMPORTANT TASK...

WHEN BOURNE LEFT THAT BRASS-HAT'S HEADQUARTERS HE WAS IN AN ELATED MOOD. BUT HIS FEELING OF WELL-BEING WOULD HAVE TAKEN A DIVE HAD HE OVERHEARD THE CONVERSATION WHICH FOLLOWED HIS DEPARTURE.
POOR OLD DAVID BOURNE. HE DOESN'T REALISE HIS CROWD HAVE SIMPLY BEEN PULLED IN AT THE LAST MINUTE TO RELEASE A BATTLE-WORTHY UNIT FOR THE MAIN SHOW, SIR.
YES, THE OVER-ALL PLAN CALLS FOR A LIMITED SHOW OF FORCE THERE TO DISSUADE THE GERMANS AND ITALIANS FROM MAKING A THRUST. BUT I'LL LAY ODDS NO ENEMY WILL EVER BE WITHIN MILES OF BOURNE.


THE LIEUTENANT-GENERAL WAS WRONG. WHILE MOVING OVER A DESERT ROUTE THAT CROSSED THE EGYPTIAN-LIBYAN BORDER, DAVID BOURNE'S BATTALION WAS OBSERVED BY A SKY-PATROL THAT CAME SWOOPING OUT OF THE WESTERING SUN . . .
ACHTUNG! WE HAVE A TARGET!

DOWN ON THE DESERT ROAD, ANXIOUS EYES TOOK THE MEASURE OF THOSE PLANES— SPECULATIVELY . . .
DO YOU THINK THEY'RE OURS, SIR?
NO, BY THUNDER I DON'T! PULL UP!

THE COLONEL'S TRUCK SKIDDED TO A STANDSTILL. HE AND HIS DRIVER SCRAMBLED FROM IT. IN A MOMENT, THE WHOLE COLUMN WAS GRINDING TO A HALT IN A WELTER OF DUST . . .
EVERYBODY OFF THE ROAD! AIRCRAFT ACTION!
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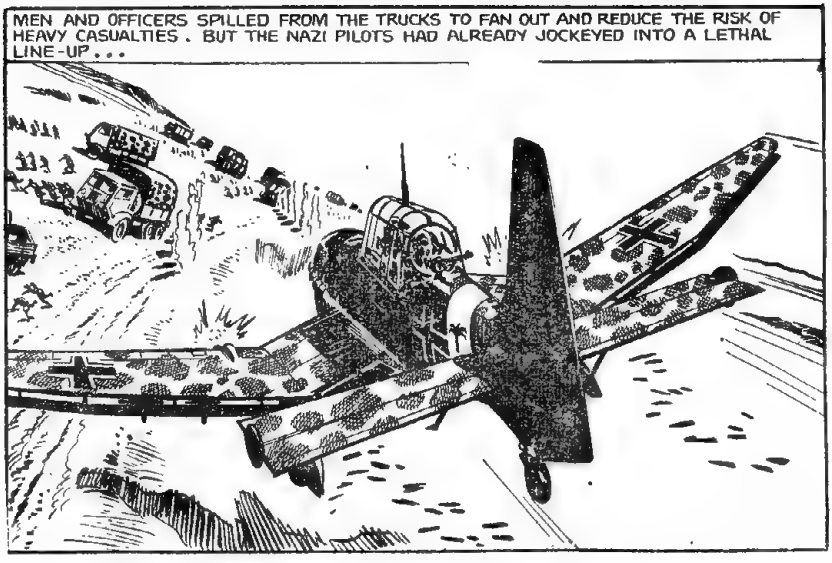

MEN AND OFFICERS SPILLED FROM THE TRUCKS TO FAN OUT AND REDUCE THE RISK OF HEAVY CASUALTIES. BUT THE NAZI PILOTS HAD ALREADY JOCKEYED INTO A LETHAL LINE-UP . . .

GUNS HAMMERING, THE FIRST OF THE GERMAN PLANES MADE A VICIOUS PASS AT THE COLUMN AND BACKED UP THE LASH OF ITS BULLETS WITH A STICK OF BOMBS.

THE BOMBS WERE OFF THE MARK — BAR ONE. THAT ONE DROPPED CLOSE TO THE TAIL OF A THIRTY-HUNDREDWEIGHT TRUCK DRIVEN BY GEORGE WATTON . . .

BEFORE GEORGE COULD LUNGE TOWARDS THE OTHER DOOR, THE BODY OF HIS TRUCK DISINTEGRATED BEHIND HIM IN A BLOTCH OF FLAME.
R.S.M. BARKER WAS NEARBY... STILL TIED TO THE REGIMENT...
THAT MAN'S STILL ALIVE, SERGEANT THETFORD! GIVE ME A HAND AND WE'LL PRISE HIM OUT OF THE WRECKAGE!
GEORGE WATTON WAS VERY MUCH ALIVE. MIRACULOUSLY, HE WAS NOT EVEN SCRATCHED. SUCH IS THE FREAKISHNESS OF WAR...
CRUMBS! LOOK AT MY TRUCK! WHAT DO I DO NOW?
YOU FIND A BILLET IN ONE OF THE RIFLE-COMPANIES, ME LAD! HERE, COP HOLD OF THIS BUNDOOK. IT BELONGS TO YOU.

BARKER AND SAM THETFORD RUSHED WATTON OFF THE ROAD THROUGH A SPRAY OF BULLETS. MEANWHILE, OFFICERS AND NON-COMS OF THE BATTALION WERE CREATING ORDER OUT OF CONFUSION . . .
AIRCRAFT ACTION FRONT! RAPID FIRE!
THE NAZIS CONTINUED TO HARRY THE BATTALION AND ITS TRANSPORT, BUT WERE THROWN OFF THEIR AIM BY THE BLIZZARDS OF LEAD THAT CHALLENGED THEM . . .

AS THE ENEMY AIRCRAFT SPED OFF INTO THE BLUE, PRIVATE GEORGE WATTON PASSED A BALEFUL COMMENT . . .
THOSE SO-AND-SO'S BIT OFF MORE THAN THEY COULD CHEW WHEN THEY PICKED ON US!
YOU'RE DEAD-RIGHT, MATE!
DON'T TELL ME SOME OF THIS MOB ARE GOING TO START LINE-SHOOTING! YOU'D THINK THEY'D BEEN IN A FULL-SCALE BATTLE INSTEAD OF A FEW MINUTES' BARNEY WITH THE LUFTWAFFE . . .

THE REGIMENT BURIED ITS DEAD AND THEN THE COLUMN RESUMED ITS SOUTH-WESTWARD JOURNEY ACROSS THE DESERT . . .

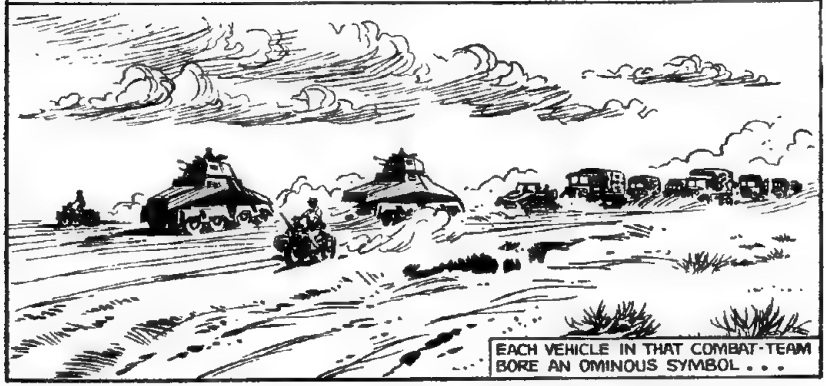
SO AT LENGTH, COLONEL BOURNE AND HIS MEN REACHED THEIR DESTINATION . . . THE WADI KHALFAYA . . . WHERE, CONTRARY TO THE OPINION OF A BRASS-HAT, BATTLE WOULD BE JOINED — AND A DERIDED UNIT PUT TO THE CRUELLEST TEST!

THE WADI KHALFAYA . . . FEW WHO SURVIVED THE FIGHTING THERE WILL EVER FORGET THEIR FIRST SIGHT OF IT . . . A MILE-WIDE VALLEY, HARSH AND FORBIDDING. THE REGIMENT WAS TO DIG IN ON ITS SANDY SIDE.

A VALLEY AS SILENT AND AS DESOLATE AS A LUNAR LANDSCAPE JUST THEN . . . BUT SOON TO BE TEEMING WITH LIFE — AND TUMULTUOUS WITH DEATH . . .

Chapter 3. WADI KHALFAYA

THE GRUMBLE OF GUNFIRE BETOKENED THE OPENING OF THE BRITISH OFFENSIVE IN THE NORTH. LIKE FAR-OFF THUNDER, IT WAS FAINTLY AUDIBLE TO A COMBAT-TEAM ROLLING ACROSS THE SOUTHERLY REACHES OF THE DESERT.



EACH VEHICLE IN THAT COMBAT-TEAM BORE AN OMINOUS SYMBOL . . .

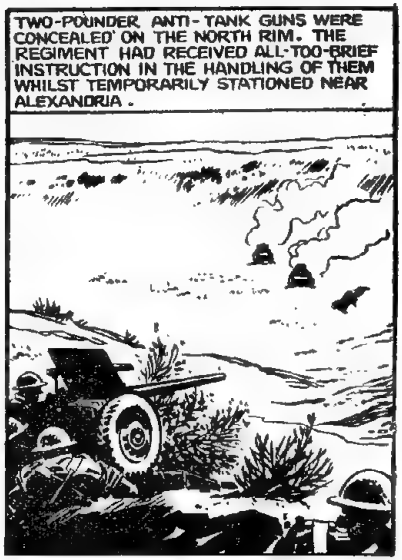
. . . A SYMBOL IN THE FORM OF A SWASTIKA SUPERIMPOSED ON A PALM-TREE . . . THE SYMBOL OF ROMMEL'S AFRIKA KORPS, PRIDE OF THE GERMAN WEHRMACHT . . .

THE OBERST SPOKE WITH ARROGANT CONFIDENCE . . .
ACCORDING TO OUR INFORMATION, THE WADI IS HELD ONLY BY THIRD-RATE TROOPS – REGARDED WITH CONTEMPT BY THE BRITISH THEMSELVES. THEY HAVE A NICKNAME — 'THE SCARLET RUNNERS.' I DO NOT KNOW QUITE WHAT IT MEANS BUT IT REFERS TO SOME DISGRACE, I BELIEVE.
SO? THEN I'VE A MIND TO USE IT AS A BATTLE-CRY, HERR OBERST. IT WILL PROBABLY COMPLETE THEIR DEMORALISATION AFTER OUR GUNS HAVE SOFTENED THEM UP.

THE GERMAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE WAS OBVIOUSLY EFFICIENT – AND THE DETAILS GLEANED BY IT HAD INDUCED THE NAZIS TO GAMBLE ON THIS COUNTER-STROKE, SO SOON TO BE REVEALED TO WATCHFUL EYES . . .
MISTER CURTIS – SARN'T THETFORD – I CAN SEE SOMETHING MOVING TO THE SOUTH!
HE'S RIGHT, YOU KNOW! RUNNER, NIP BACK TO COMPANY HEADQUARTERS AND REPORT THAT A DUST-CLOUD HAS BEEN SPOTTED.

THE DUST-CLOUD HERALDED ARMOURED SCOUT-CARS, PUSHING OUT WELL AHEAD OF THE GERMAN COLUMN . . .

THEY REACHED THE WADI. ALL REMAINED QUIET ON ITS NORTH RIM. THE WHOLE REGIMENT THERE HAD BEEN ALERTED. THE MEN WERE STANDING-TO . . .
THE ENGLANDERS ARE THERE, ALL RIGHT. WE'LL PUSH CLOSE ENOUGH TO FORM SOME IDEA OF THEIR DISPOSITIONS.
JAWOHL! OBERST RITTER WILL COMMEND US FOR THAT.


TWO-POUNDER ANTI-TANK GUNS WERE CONCEALED ON THE NORTH RIM. THE REGIMENT HAD RECEIVED ALL-TOO-BRIEF INSTRUCTION IN THE HANDLING OF THEM WHILST TEMPORARILY STATIONED NEAR ALEXANDRIA.

THE ENEMY SCOUT-CARS CARRIED A COUPLE OF MACHINE-GUNS APIECE. TWO OF THOSE GUNS STARTED TO CHATTER IMPUDENTLY... SPRAYING THE NORTH RIM WITH TWENTY-MILLIMETRE SLUGS... INVITING RESPONSE...

FOUR SOLID SHOTS WHISTLED PAST THE NAZI TURRETS, BUT TWO SLAMMED HOME — PUNCHING THROUGH THE ARMOUR OF ONE OF THE CARS AS BOTH WERE ON THE POINT OF TURNING AWAY...

THE SURVIVING SCOUT-CAR WEAVED BACK ACROSS THE WADI AND THE INEXPERT CREWS OF THE TWO-POUNDERS FAILED TO CLAIM IT AS A SECOND "KILL".
FASTER! FASTER! DRIVE LIKE THE DEVIL! BUT KEEP SWERVING!

THE FUGITIVE ARMOURED CAR REGAINED THE FAR SIDE OF THE VALLEY - CLIMBED OVER THE SOUTH RIM TO RE-JOIN THE MAIN BODY OF THE GERMAN COMBAT-TEAM.
I REGRET TO REPORT THE LOSS OF SCHMIDT AND HIS CREW, HERR OBERST. THE ENGLANDERS ARE SUPPORTED BY ANTI-TANK GUNS AND MY IMPRESSION IS THAT THE POSITION THEY HOLD IS A STRONG ONE. IT MAY NOT BE SO EASY TO DISLODGE THEM.
YOU THINK NOT? WAIT UNTIL OUR ARTILLERY GOES TO WORK ON THEM.

RITTER WASTED NO TIME. A BRISK OUTLINE OF A BATTLE-PLAN TO AN ORDER-GROUP OF HIS SUBORDINATE OFFICERS — AND BEFORE LONG THE BATTERY ATTACHED TO HIS COMMAND WAS "IN BUSINESS"...

THE GERMAN GUNS BARKED STRIDENTLY. A FLIGHT OF SHELLS SAILED HIGH OVER THE WADI, PLUNGING FROM THE ZENITH OF THEIR TRAJECTORY. TO FALL SHORT, FLINGING UP GEYSERS OF SAND AND RUBBLE...

THEN THEY RANGED ACCURATELY ON THE BRITISH REGIMENT'S FORWARD POSITIONS. KHAKI-CLAD FIGURES CROUCHED LOW AS FLAME AND DEBRIS ERUPTED ALL ABOUT THEM . . .

THE TEMPO OF THE BARRAGE QUICKENED. SALVO AFTER SALVO BLUDGEONED INTO THE GROUND — SAVAGING IT — SMOTHERING THE CRIES OF STRICKEN MEN . . .

UNDER SHELLFIRE A MAN MAY IMAGINE HE ALONE IS AFRAID. SAM THETFORD IMAGINED IT, MISTAKENLY. SO DID MANY OTHERS — INCLUDING GEORGE WATTON . . .

AT THE BATTALION COMMAND-POST, WHERE THE RAIN OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE WAS AT PRESENT FAR LESS INTENSE, DAVID BOURNE LOOKED OUT ON THE HOLOCAUST THAT WAS ENGULFING THE FORWARD POSITIONS . . .
I SHOULD BE DOWN THERE IN THE THICK OF IT WITH MY MEN. THEY'RE TAKING AN UNHOLY PASTING. IT'S UP TO ME TO SHOW MYSELF TO THEM . . . SET THEM SOME SORT OF EXAMPLE . . . IF — IF I CAN!

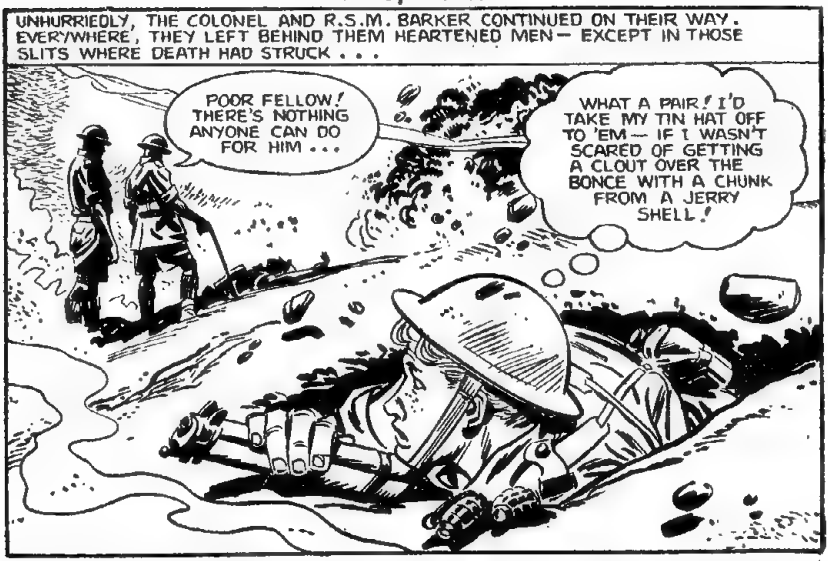
WHY DID HE HAVE TO RECALL AT THAT INSTANT A CERTAIN ANCESTOR OF HIS . . ? A MAJOR BOURNE WHO HAD FAILED THE REGIMENT IN THE CRIMEA AND WHOSE MEMORY HAD BEEN A "SKELETON IN THE FAMILY CUPBOARD" EVER SINCE . . . THE COLONEL SHIVERED, THEN STEELED HIMSELF . . .
I THINK I'LL MAKE A TOUR OF OUR FRONT-LINE POSITIONS, MISTER BARKER —

HE WONDERED IF HIS VOICE BETRAYED HIS INNER FEARS. IT DID NOT. R.S.M. BARKER STARED AT HIM IN AWE . . .
I'LL GO WITH YOU, SIR.
THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY, MISTER BARKER. YOU STAY HERE.

THE COLONEL SET OUT. TO LOOK AT HIM, YOU WOULD HAVE THOUGHT HE WAS OFF FOR A QUIET STROLL DOWN AN ENGLISH LANE — INSTEAD OF AN EXCURSION INTO THE HEART OF AN INFERNO. BARKER GULPED, THEN FELL IN BEHIND HIM . . .
BY JINGO, I'VE SERVED UNDER SOME CRACKERJACK BATTALION COMMANDERS, BUT THIS ONE TOPS THE LOT! I'D NEVER HAVE GUESSED THE OLD BOY HAD IT IN HIM!

THEY PASSED INTO THE HIDEOUS, CLAMOURING WELTER OF THE BARRAGE. BOURNE COULD SEE AT ONCE HIS MEN WERE SHAKEN. BUT HE SAW, TOO, THE EFFECT HIS PRESENCE HAD ON THEM AND HE WARMED TO THEIR REACTION . . .
IT'S THE COLONEL! AND COOL AS YOU PLEASE!
YOU'D THINK HE WAS ON A BLINKING BARRACK-ROOM INSPECTION! BY GOLLY, HE MUST HAVE NERVES LIKE IRON!

NERVES LIKE IRON . . ? R.S.M. BARKER MARVELLED AT THE COLONEL AS WELL. HE HIMSELF HAD TO RESIST WITH ALL HIS MIGHT A DESPERATE LONGING TO SEEK COVER . . . HE WOULD HAVE BEEN SURPRISED IF HE COULD HAVE READ DAVID BOURNE'S MIND . . .
WHAT A SOLDIER THIS FELLOW BARKER IS! AS POKER BACKED AS THOUGH HE WERE ON PARADE! I WISH I HAD HIS COURAGE! ME, WITH MY LEGS LIKE RUBBER! IF I DIDN'T HAVE THIS WALKING-STICK I BELIEVE THEY'D BUCKLE UNDER ME IN SHEER FRIGHT!
AH, WATTON . . . AND HOW ARE YOU GETTING ALONG? YOU LOOK PRETTY SNUG IN THERE, I MUST SAY.
SNUG, SIR? I WOULDN'T MAKE OUT I WAS COSY. BUT I'D RATHER BE HERE THAN UP THERE WITH YOU AND THE R.S.M.! YOU'D BETTER HOP IT, SIR. THAT AIN'T NO PLACE TO BE — OUT IN THE OPEN WITH ALL THIS MUCK FLYING AROUND!


UNHURRIEDLY, THE COLONEL AND R.S.M. BARKER CONTINUED ON THEIR WAY. EVERYWHERE, THEY LEFT BEHIND THEM HEARTENED MEN — EXCEPT IN THOSE SLITS WHERE DEATH HAD STRUCK . . .
POOR FELLOW! THERE'S NOTHING ANYONE CAN DO FOR HIM . . .
WHAT A PAIR! I'D TAKE MY TIN HAT OFF TO 'EM — IF I WASN'T SCARED OF GETTING A CLOUT OVER THE BONCE WITH A CHUNK FROM A JERRY SHELL!

BY THE LAW OF AVERAGES, DAVID BOURNE AND BARKER SHOULD HAVE BEEN BLOWN TO SMITHEREENS. THEY WERE NOT EVEN GRAZED. BUT WHEN THE BARRAGE FINALLY LIFTED IT WAS PLAIN THE BATTALION HAD TAKEN A DRUBBING . . .
AN ATTACK'S COMING IN, MISTER CURTIS! THE WADI'S STIFF WITH JERRIES! I CAN SEE 'EM THROUGH THE SMOKE!

RIGHT ENOUGH, A FOLLOW-UP ASSAULT HAD BEEN MOUNTED UNDER THE SCREEN OF THE ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENT. THREE WAVES OF NAZI INFANTRY WERE STORMING ACROSS THE VALLEY . . .
FORWARD! FORWARD!

BUT NOW THE BRITISH MORTARS CALLED THE TUNE. BOMBS CRUMPED DOWN ON THE WADI'S BED AND GROUND AND AIR QUIVERED TO THE BATTERING IMPACT OF THEIR CONCUSSIONS . . .

THE LEADING WAVE OF NAZIS LOST THEIR IMMACULATE FORMATION — BECAME A RAGGED, DISCONTINUOUS LINE WIDE-GAPPED WHERE HUDDLED BODIES LAY. YET THESE MEN WERE FANATICAL, FIRST-RATE SOLDIERS.

A TEMPEST OF SMALL-ARMS' FIRE SLASHED INTO THE REMNANTS OF THAT FIRST WAVE OF INFANTRY AS THEY ADVANCED AT A RUN. MANY FELL . . . YET NUMBERS STILL CAME ON, BARE-TOOTHED AND RABID IN THEIR FEROCITY.

SOME ON THE RECEIVING END OF THE ASSAULT MIGHT HAVE QUAILED. THEY DID NOT – BECAUSE THERE WAS NOT A MAN IN THE REGIMENT WHOSE BACKBONE HAD NOT BEEN STIFFENED BY THE SIGHT OF HIS COLONEL UNDER FIRE . . .
FIX BAYONETS AND GET STUCK INTO 'EM, LADS!

IT WAS PANDEMONIUM . . . WILD YELLS, THE STUTTER OF BRENS AND THE WICKED, VIBRATING BRRRRP OF GERMAN SCHMEISSERS . . . AND SPANG IN THE MIDDLE OF IT ALL, A SINGLE PISTOL-SHOT THAT SEEMED TO HAVE GEORGE WATTON'S NUMBER ON IT!
DIE – SCARLET RUNNER!

BUT THE SHOT FROM MAJOR GRUNWALD'S LUGER MISSED WATTON'S HEAD BY A FRACTION. NEXT MOMENT, THE GERMAN WAS FLAT ON HIS BACK . . .
SCARLET RUNNER, EH? WHY, YOU PERISHING SLOB, I WOULDN'T WEAR THAT FROM ANOTHER ENGLISHMAN — LET ALONE A ROTTEN NAZI!

IN SIXTY HECTIC SECONDS THE LAST OF THE GERMANS TO REACH THE BRITISH LINES HAD BEEN ELIMINATED. MEANWHILE THE OTHER TWO WAVES OF ENEMY INFANTRY WERE FLOUNDERING FORWARD THROUGH A DELUGE OF MORTAR FIRE. FROM A VANTAGE-POINT ACROSS THE WADI, RITTER WATCHED THEM . . .
SO FAR AS I CAN SEE, THE FIRST ELEMENTS IN THE ATTACK SEEM TO HAVE CRUMBLED AWAY. BUT THE SUPPORTING COMPANIES ARE STILL PUSHING AHEAD.

THE SUPPORTING COMPANIES DID NOT PUSH AHEAD FOR LONG. THERE WERE LIMITS EVEN TO THE BATTLE-ARDOUR OF THE 90½. THEY FACED-ABOUT AS BRENS AND MORTARS OPENED UP...

AS THE GERMANS STREAMED BACK ACROSS THE WADI IN GROWING DISORDER, THEIR BEWILDERED FORCE-COMMANDER MUST HAVE DOUBTED THE ACCURACY OF THE GERMAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE...

Chapter 4. The MARK of the EAGLE

THE SUBALTERN'S EARS HAD NOT DECEIVED HIM. NOT FAR AHEAD, DUG-IN GERMAN LOOK-OUTS WERE WHILING AWAY THEIR DREARY SPELL OF DUTY BY CLEANING THEIR FIGHTING-GEAR . . .
I WONDER HOW THE MAIN BATTLE IN THE NORTH IS GOING, HANS.
NOT TOO WELL — AT A GUESS. THE GUNFIRE HAS MOVED FARTHER WEST — WHICH WOULD MEAN OUR FORCES UP THERE HAVE RETREATED.

THE YOUNG BRITISH OFFICER LISTENED ATTENTIVELY, BUT THE NAZIS BEGAN TO GOSSIP IDLY OF MATTERS UNCONNECTED WITH WAR . . .
WE'RE WASTING OUR TIME HERE, WATTON. WE'LL SLINK OFF TO THE LEFT. PASS THE WORD TO THE OTHERS — BUT SOFTLY!

IN THE NEXT TWO HOURS CURTIS EAVESDROPPED ON SNATCHES OF CONVERSATION WHICH REACHED HIM FROM OTHER ENEMY SLITS. THEY YIELDED NOTHING OF REAL SIGNIFICANCE — UNTIL HE OVERHEARD A FRAGMENT OF TALK BETWEEN AN OFFICER AND A NON-COM . . .
SERGEANT, A SQUADRON OF PANZERS HAS BEEN DIRECTED HERE IN ANSWER TO THE FORCE-COMMANDER'S APPEAL. IT WILL ARRIVE IN TIME FOR A DAWN ATTACK AGAINST THE RIGHT FLANK OF THE BRITISH.
THAT IS EXCELLENT NEWS, HERR HAUPTMANN.

THIS WAS VITAL INFORMATION INDEED . . . BUT DISTURBING, TOO — THOUGH TO BE FOREWARNED AS TO THE ENEMY'S INTENTIONS WOULD AT LEAST BE OF SOME ADVANTAGE TO HIS REGIMENT . . .
THE ATTACK WILL BE HEAVILY SCREENED BY SMOKE, TO ENSURE THE PRESENCE OF ARMOUR COMES AS A COMPLETE SURPRISE TO THE ENGLANDERS. SEE THE MEN IN YOUR SQUAD ARE TOLD.
JA, HERR HAUPTMANN.

CURTIS STARTED BACK WITH HIS LITTLE PARTY THEN. THEY KEPT LOW TILL THEY ROSE TO CROWD ON SPEED. BUT THEN THEIR LUCK RAN OUT!
LOOK OUT, SIR! A VEREY LIGHT'S JUST GONE UP!

A REVEALING GLOW BATHED THE WADI. CURTIS FROZE, ACCORDING TO THE BOOK. THE OTHERS SKIPPED FOR COVER — ANY KIND OF COVER...
STAY STILL, YOU FOOLS! FOR PETE'S SAKE, STAY STILL!

TRACER FLAYED AT THEM. WATTON FETCHED UP IN A FOLD OF THE GROUND, UNSCATHED. THE THREE WHO HAD JUMPED WITH HIM WERE SCYTHED DOWN — AND CURTIS, TOO!

THE FLARE DIED OUT. WATTON SCRAMBLED FROM HIS COVER AND DRAGGED THE LIEUTENANT TO ITS COMPARATIVE SECURITY . . .

WATTON TRIED TO REMONSTRATE. THE LIEUTENANT CUT HIM SHORT — TRANSLATED THE INFORMATION CONCERNING THE PANZERS — THRUST HIS RELUCTANT SUBORDINATE FROM HIM AS THE SPANDAUS CEASED FIRE . . .
IT DON'T SEEM RIGHT TO SLOPE OFF AND LEAVE YOU, SIR —
YOU'VE GOT TO! YOU'D NEVER MAKE IT ACROSS THE WADI WITH ME AS A DEAD-WEIGHT ON YOUR BACK. REMEMBER, WATCH FOR FLARES . . . NOW GET GOING!
WATTON TOOK OFF. IT WAS GO-STOP-GO FOR HIM ALL THE WAY — WHAT WITH THE FLARES LIGHTING UP THE WADI SPASMODICALLY AND TRACER BURNING THE AIR AROUND HIM . . .
THE SO-AND-SO'S HAVE SPOTTED ME ALL RIGHT! ANY MINUTE NOW, AND I'LL HAVE BOUGHT IT!
YET HE REGAINED HIS OWN LINES. SCARED? HE WAS ALMOST ROUND THE BEND . . . NO DENYING IT . . . HE HAD TO CLAMP HIS TEETH TOGETHER TO STOP THEM CHATTERING . . .
YOU ALL RIGHT, WATTON? SPEAK UP, MAN!
Y-Y-YES, SARGE . . . I — I'M ALL RIGHT . . . M-MISTER CURTIS, HE SENT ME IN WITH A M-MESSAGE . . . THE JERRIES ARE BRINGING UP TANKS . . .

HE MANAGED TO STAMMER OUT CURTIS' INFORMATION AND SAM THETFORD PROMPTLY HURRIED OFF TO PASS ON THE INFORMATION. HE RETURNED IN DUE COURSE WITH HIS COMPANY COMMANDER AND COLONEL BOURNE — TO FIND WATTON HAD VANISHED . . .
WELL, WHERE IS WATTON, SERGEANT? I'VE ACTED ON THE MESSAGE HE BROUGHT, BUT I WANT TO QUESTION HIM FURTHER . . .
I LEFT HIM HERE, SIR. I CAN'T THINK WHERE HE'S GOT TO — UNLESS HE'S DONE A BUNK. HE WAS IN A STATE, I CAN TELL YOU . . .
BUT GEORGE WATTON HAD NOT TURNED DESERTER. A BREN-GUNNER REPORTED HAVING SEEN HIM RE-ENTER THE WADI. PRESENTLY, FLARES AND TRACER FROM THE GERMAN LINES LENT SUBSTANCE TO THE BREN-GUNNER'S STATEMENT. AND LATER, MUCH LATER, WATTON SHOWED UP AGAIN . . .
LOOK, MISTER CURTIS. THEY'RE SHIFTING THE GUNS ON TO THE RIGHT FLANK.
FINE, WATTON — FINE . . . AND SOON IT'S GOING TO BE DAYBREAK. THEN WE'LL SEE WHO GETS THE SURPRISE — US OR THE GERMANS . . .

THE ENEMY'S ARTILLERY LAID DOWN A PRELIMINARY BARRAGE AT DAWN . . .
HERE WE GO AGAIN! IT STRIKES ME THE OLD BOY TAKES TO SHELLFIRE LIKE A DUCK TO WATER . . .

THE BATTALION HAD SUSTAINED SEVERE CASUALTIES IN THE FIRST NAZI BOMBARDMENT. IT SUFFERED EVEN HEAVIER LOSSES IN THIS ONE. FOR TWENTY MINUTES THE BLASTING CONTINUED WITH UNDIMINISHED FURY. THEN SMOKE-SHELLS BLANKETED THE AREA . . .

BLINDED BY THAT FOG AND STILL TAKING A BEATING FROM INTERMITTENT SALVOES OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE, THE BRITISH WAITED . . . THIN ON THE GROUND NOW, WHITTLED DOWN TO LESS THAN HALF-STRENGTH . . .

NOT MANY MEN LEFT IN THE REGIMENT TO COPE, SIR.

WE'VE GOT TO COPE. NO HELP OF ANY KIND IS AVAILABLE TO US — NOT EVEN AIR SUPPORT. THE OFFENSIVE IS PROGRESSING IN THE NORTH, BUT IT'S STRAINING THE EIGHTH ARMY'S RESOURCES TO THE LIMIT.

AT LAST THE GERMAN GUNS FELL SILENT. INSTEAD THERE CAME THE SNARL OF ENGINES, THE CLANKING OF TRACKS — AND THE MEASURED RHYTHM OF VOICES UPLIFTED IN A NAZI MARCHING SONG . . .

ONCE AGAIN, COMRADES! LOUDER THIS TIME! 'THE HORST WESSEL'! AND LET THE ENEMIES OF THE FATHERLAND TREMBLE AS THEY HEAR IT!

THE ENEMIES OF THE FATHERLAND DID NOT TREMBLE. THEY DROWNED OUT THE "HORST WESSEL" SONG IN A CATARACT OF STEEL AS THE SPEARHEAD OF THE GERMAN ONSLAUGHT RUMBLED IN THROUGH THE SMOKE . . .

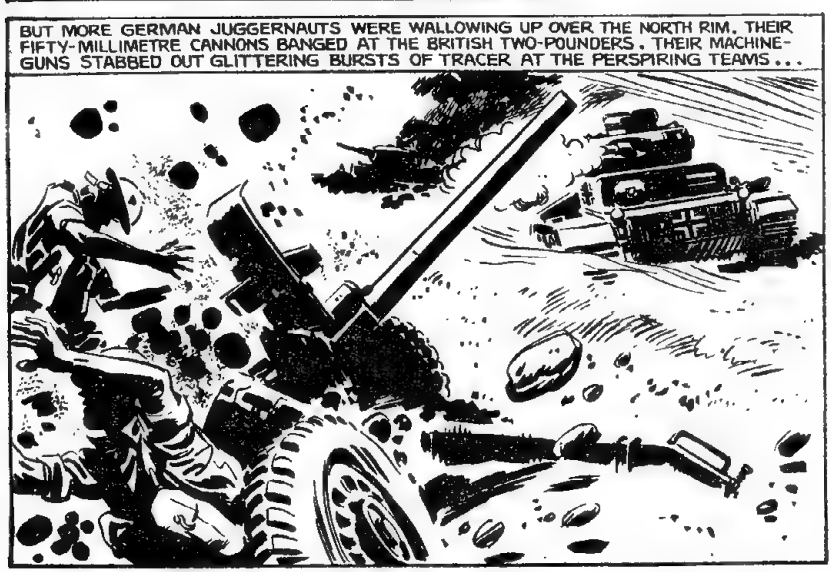
GET THEM! EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM!

IN THE OPENING EXCHANGE OF BLOWS, THE SMOKE-SCREEN ACTUALLY FAVOURED THE TWO-POUNDERS MORE THAN IT DID THE LUMBERING IRONCLADS . . .

THE LEADING PANZERS WERE CLUBBED TO A STANDSTILL. ONLY ONE OF THEM DISGORGED ANY OF ITS OCCUPANTS — THREE DEMONIAC FIGURES OUT OF A FIVE-MAN CREW . . .

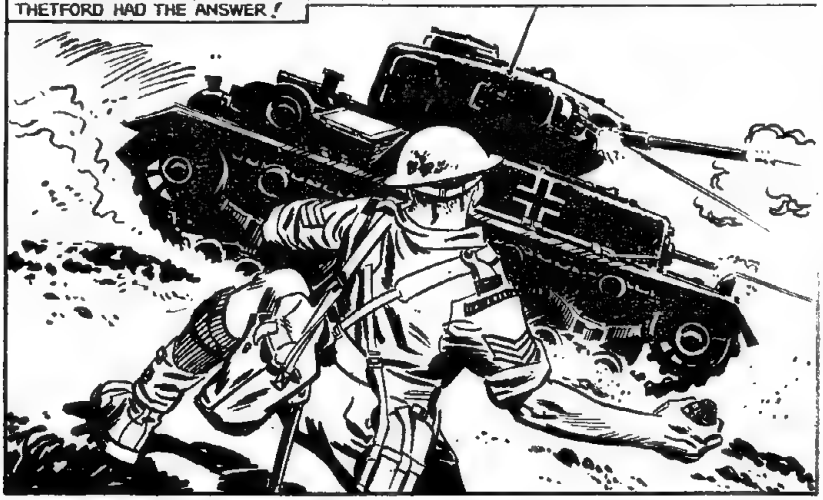
LET'S HOPE THAT BREN MAG'S NOT EMPTY!

THE MAGAZINE ON THE BREN WAS FULL, BUT THOSE RAMPAGING TANK-MEN HAD WIPED OUT A TWO-POUNDER'S TEAM BEFORE R.S.M. BARKER HAD A CHANCE TO CRACK DOWN ON THEM . . .
GOOD WORK, MISTER BARKER!


BUT MORE GERMAN JUGGERNAUTS WERE WALLOWING UP OVER THE NORTH RIM. THEIR FIFTY-MILLIMETRE CANNONS BANGED AT THE BRITISH TWO-POUNDERS. THEIR MACHINE-GUNS STABBED OUT GLITTERING BURSTS OF TRACER AT THE PERSPIRING TEAMS . . .

IT WAS A FIGHT TO THE FINISH BETWEEN PANZERS AND TWO-POUNDERS — WITH THE ODDS STACKED AGAINST THE LITTLE ANTI-TANK WEAPONS BECAUSE OF THE IRONCLADS' SUPERIOR NUMBERS AND FIRE-POWER . . .
OUR GUNNERS HAVE HAD IT, SIR! THEY PUT UP A MAGNIFICENT SHOW, BUT THEY'VE HAD IT . . .
THE NAZIS HAD PRACTICALLY THROWN AWAY THEIR TRUMP CARD NEVERTHELESS, BY TACTICS THAT HAD COMMITTED THEIR ARMOUR TO A POINT-BLANK DUEL. DOWNRIGHT BRITISH OBSTINACY HAD ALMOST BALANCED THE SCALES. ALMOST, NOT QUITE . . . ONE PANZER REMAINED AT LARGE . . .
NO, YOU DON'T!

THAT LAST IRONCLAD CHANGED COURSE TO ROVE OVER THE FORWARD SLITS AND SHOOT THEM UP — RIGHT, LEFT AND CENTRE. WITH THE GERMAN INFANTRY MOVING IN, A TANK RUNNING RIOT AMONG THE DEFENDERS WOULD HAVE SPELT DISASTER ... SAM THETFORD HAD THE ANSWER!



HE PULLED THE PIN OUT OF A MILLS THIRTY-SIX, LET GO OF ITS LEVER, TOSSED THE GRENADE UNDER THE PANZER'S NEAREST TRACK — THEN PLUNGED AWAY FROM THE TANK. A SPURT OF TRACER FLASHED AT HIM ...

GEORGE WATTON'S URGENT VOICE DREW SAM LIKE A MAGNET. HE VEERED TOWARDS THE FORMER TRUCK-DRIVER'S SLIT-TRENCH — SWALLOW-DIVED INTO IT — HEARD THE SHARP CRACK OF THE EXPLODING GRENADE BEHIND HIM ...

THE PANZER SLEWED TO A HALT WITH A SEVERED TRACK. ITS CREW WOULD HAVE DONE WELL TO STAY PUT, BUT CHOSE TO SWARM OUT AS THE GERMAN INFANTRY STORMED INTO THE ASSAULT . . .

ADVANCING AFRIKA KORPS INFANTRYMEN CAME IN FOR THE REST OF THE HAVERSACK'S CONTENTS — AND FOR BULLETS AND BAYONETS BESIDES . . .

THE NAZI FOOT-SLOGGERS WERE MORE OR LESS FRESH — BUT NOW THEY WERE KNOCKED BACK ON THEIR HEELS . . .
NO RETREAT! NO RETREAT!

THERE WAS NO RETREAT FOR OBERST RITTER, WHO HAD ELECTED TO LEAD HIS INFANTRY CONTINGENT IN PERSON THIS TIME. HE DIED IN A BAYONET CHARGE OF COOKS, CLERKS AND OTHER HEADQUARTERS' PERSONNEL WHOM COLONEL BOURNE AND R.S.M. BARKER HAD MUSTERED . . .

THE BAYONET CHARGE SETTLED THE ISSUE BEYOND ALL DOUBT. THE ENEMY GAVE WAY AT ALL POINTS . . .
KEEP AFTER THEM, MEN! DON'T GIVE 'EM A CHANCE TO RALLY!

THAT WAS HOW THE THREAT TO THE WADI KHALFAYA WAS OBLITERATED, SO THAT AN EIGHTH ARMY OFFENSIVE WAS ABLE TO DRIVE ON WITHOUT HINDRANCE BY ENEMY ACTION IN ITS REAR. AND PERHAPS IT WAS NOT SURPRISING THAT R.S.M. BARKER HAD SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT THAT POSTING OF HIS!
COLONEL BOURNE, ABOUT MY REQUEST FOR A TRANSFER BACK TO MY OWN UNIT . . . I — ER — I'D LIKE TO WITHDRAW IT . . . THAT IS, IF YOU'VE NO OBJECTION . . .
I'VE CERTAINLY NO OBJECTION, MISTER BARKER. THERE ISN'T MUCH LEFT OF THIS REGIMENT AND I'M GOING TO NEED SOMEONE LIKE YOU TO HELP BUILD IT UP AGAIN.

BUT WAIT TILL YOU HEAR THE SEQUEL. WEEKS LATER, THE REMNANTS OF THE REGIMENT WERE PARADED BEFORE A HIGH-UP OUTSIDE ALEXANDRIA. EVERY MAN WAS SPORTING AN EMBLEM ON HIS SLEEVE – AND EVERY MAN WAS PAYING SILENT TRIBUTE TO FALLEN COMRADES WHO HAD HELPED TO PUT IT BACK THERE . . .
I COUNT IT A PRIVILEGE THAT I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO SPEAK TO YOU OF THE DEBT WHICH THE ENTIRE EIGHTH ARMY OWES TO THIS UNIT. IT IS MY PRIVILEGE, TOO, TO CONGRATULATE YOU ON THE HIGH-LEVEL DECISION AUTHORISING YOU TO WEAR A PROUD BATTLE-HONOUR ONCE MORE . . .

SERGEANT THETFORD AND PRIVATE WATTON WERE AMONG THE FIFTY-ODD SURVIVORS WHO WERE THERE WITH COLONEL BOURNE . . . AND MAYBE THREE WHO HAD ANSWERED TO THOSE NAMES IN THE CRIMEAN CAMPAIGN WERE THERE IN SPIRIT AS WELL . . .

THAT I CANNOT TELL YOU . . . BUT I CAN VOUCH FOR THE FACT THAT THERE WAS NOT A LIVING SOUL PRESENT ON THAT PARADE WHO DID NOT HAVE A LUMP IN HIS THROAT. I KNOW FROM THE WAY WE SPOKE OF IT AFTERWARDS . . . FOR I WAS ONE OF THEM.

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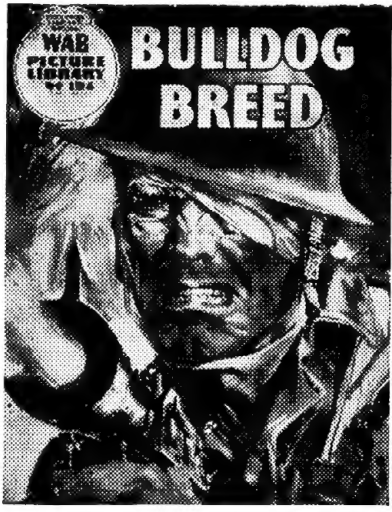

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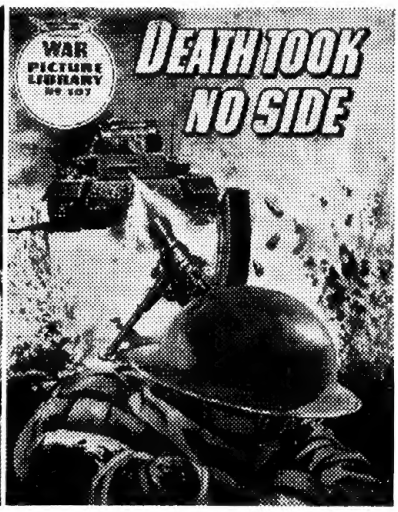

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